



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

March 9, 2001

1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Nongame Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Missoula Office

MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
North Powell County Conservation District
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
Montana State Library, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Box 1, Greenough, MT 59836
John Krutar, 4981 Highway 200, Ovando, MT 59854
Duane Hoxworth, Ovando, MT 59854

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for a Future Fisheries Project tentatively planned to restore fish habitat on a one mile segment of Rock Creek located approximately 15 miles west of the town of Lincoln.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5 P.M., April 9, 2001 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Completion of this proposed project is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mlere@mt.state.us

Powell

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Fisheries Division

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Rock Creek Channel Reconstruction and Fishery Restoration Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purposes of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established a funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

This project is being proposed to restore a one mile degraded reach of Rock Creek by re-constructing the stream to a stable Rosgen E-type channel and by correcting riparian grazing problems using fencing and off-stream water development. The proposed project is located on property owned by Duane Hoxworth approximately 15 miles west of the town of Lincoln.

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Rock Creek, a tributary to the North Fork of the Blackfoot River, located approximately 15 miles west of the town of Lincoln within Township 14 North, Range 11 West, Section 5 in Powell County (see Attachment 1).

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "restore and enhance degraded habitats" by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on public and private lands. This proposed project would help achieve this goal.

Rock Creek is the main tributary to the lower North Fork of the Blackfoot River and supports native westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout, as well as non-native rainbow trout and brown trout. Rock Creek and its tributaries have been a focus of significant restoration efforts over the last several years. Approximately 65% of Rock Creek had been in a degraded condition prior to this recent restoration work. Degraded conditions, in part, are due to past livestock grazing practices that severely impacted the stream. This project proposes to restore a reach of unstable channel by constructing a stable E-type channel and by correcting livestock grazing problems through the development of new grazing strategies, the installation of fencing and the development of off-stream water. This proposed re-construction of approximately 1.1 miles of degraded stream channel, located in the middle reach of Rock Creek, will be the final major phase in restoring the Rock Creek watershed.

III. Scope of the Project: The proposal calls for restoring approximately 1.1 miles of Rock Creek by re-constructing an over-widened stream reach into a Rosgen E-type channel that is narrow, deep and sinuous. Approximately 5,800 feet of degraded channel will be lengthened to 8,130 feet. The re-construction project will include extensive planting of woody shrubs within the riparian corridor and the installation of large woody debris. Additionally, the project calls for removal of a stream-side corral, the

development of off-stream water tanks and water lines from off-stream water sources, the installation of some additional fencing and the development of a new grazing management system. Project construction will be overseen by personnel from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The project is expected to cost \$105,932.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$41,341.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment:

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

The restoration of a 1.1 mile reach of Rock Creek would improve salmonid habitat. The proposed project calls for lengthening the stream channel and converting the existing stream profile consisting primarily of a shallow riffle to a more narrow, deep and sinuous channel. Increasing channel diversity would enhance habitat for the benefit of all salmonid life stages. As a result, trout populations within this restored segment of Rock Creek would be expected to increase. Additionally, the proposed restoration would tend to reduce water temperatures, thereby benefiting native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations. Restoration of the riparian corridor through the planting of woody shrubs and through changes in grazing management would improve habitat for riparian dependent wildlife.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, construction will occur during a low flow period and operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota. A 310 permit will be obtained from the local Conservation District and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). In the long term, a more stable stream will be created by the re-construction of an over-widened and shallow channel to a Rosgen E-type channel capable of passing sediment loads and flows. As a result, the water quality of Rock Creek and downstream waters would be expected to improve.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils within the immediate project area would be disturbed during the period of construction but would be stabilized with transplanted sod, seeding and the planting of native woody shrubs along the stream banks. Proper grazing management within the riparian corridor using fencing and off-stream water development would allow the vegetative community, especially the woody shrubs, to recover and would help insure bank stability.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be improved by adopting a proper livestock grazing strategy for the riparian corridor, spreading seed and transplanting sod on the disturbed stream banks, and extensively planting woody shrubs along the stream corridor. The riparian vegetation would be protected from grazing by excluding livestock for several years following completion of the project and then adopting an appropriate grazing management plan thereafter.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be enhanced by restoring a degraded reach of stream to a more healthy and natural stream environment. A 1.1 mile reach of stream would be restored by converting the existing channel morphology from a wide shallow riffle to a more narrow, deep and sinuous channel. The riparian vegetative community would be enhanced by protecting the stream side corridor from overgrazing, planting native shrubs within the riparian zone and seeding and transplanting sod on disturbed stream banks.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources.

The Rock Creek drainage contains native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Bull trout have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a species of special concern in Montana. Because Rock Creek supports bull trout, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Section 6 conservation plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The proposed project is expected to restore a degraded reach of Rock Creek. As a result, the project is expected to improve recruitment of salmonids, including bull trout and cutthroat trout, to the North Fork of the Blackfoot River and main stem Blackfoot River.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project will likely require an individual Army Corp of Engineers (COE) 404 permit. Therefore, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted to determine the need for compliance with the federal historic preservation regulations. The project will not begin until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

It is anticipated that the restoration of 1.1 mile reach of Rock Creek would improve overall aquatic habitat and, as a result, would improve recruitment of trout to the North Fork of the Blackfoot River and main stem Blackfoot River. As a result, the recreational fishery in the North Fork and main stem would be expected to improve.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a 1.1 mile segment of Rock Creek will remain degraded. The channel will remain a uniform, shallow and wide riffle with limited habitat. As a result, recruitment of juvenile fish to downstream waters will remain below potential. In addition, habitat for riparian dependent wildlife will remain in a degraded condition. Recreational opportunities associated with fish and wildlife resources will remain reduced and aesthetics will continue to be impaired.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to enhance spawning, rearing and adult habitat for salmonids in Rock Creek by adjusting channel morphology to a more narrow, deep and sinuous channel. Additionally, the project calls for enhancing the riparian vegetative community and appropriately managing livestock grazing within the riparian corridor. These activities would create a more diverse habitat for aquatic life and riparian dependent wildlife. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics and water quality within the project area and would be expected to increase trout populations in Rock Creek, the North Fork of the Blackfoot River and the main stem Blackfoot River.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks web page: fwp.state.mt.us.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5 P.M. on April 9, 2001.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
Helena, MT 59620

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e-mail: mlere@mt.state.us

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title Rock Creek Channel Reconstruction and Fishery Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division-Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project This project is being proposed to restore a 1.1 mile reach of Rock Creek by re-constructing an over-widened and shallow channel to a more narrow, deeper and sinuous Rosgen E-type channel and by correcting riparian grazing problems with fencing and the development of off-stream water. The proposed project is located on property owned by Duane Hoxworth approximately 15 miles west of the town of Lincoln.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

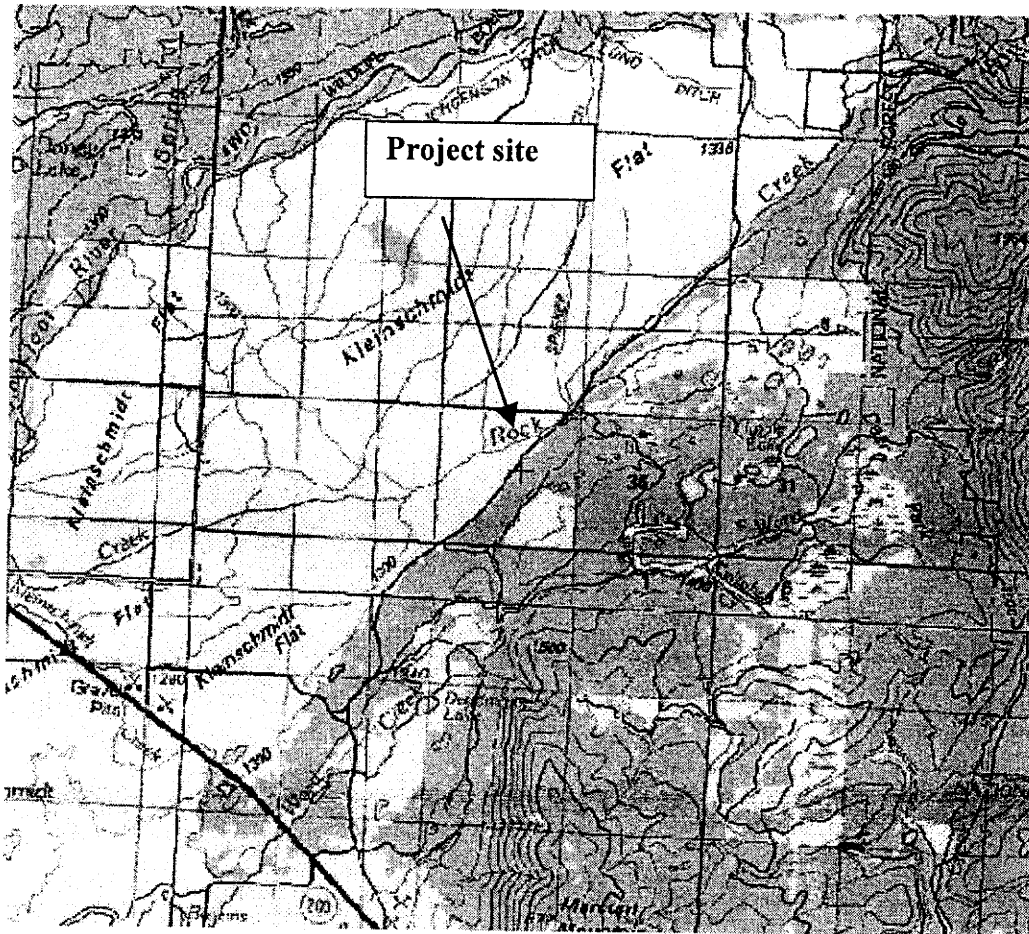
Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction North Powell County Conservation District, US Fish and

Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of
Environmental Quality, State Historical Preservation Office
Individuals or groups contributing to this EA: Ron Pierce, MFWP; Water
Consulting, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS: No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: February 26, 2001



Attachment 1. Map of Rock Creek showing location of proposed project.